

Journal Access Models & Journal Comparison Services

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Abstract

One of the most important steps in evaluating differing full-text journal resources for purchase is choosing the proper comparison service. Before selecting a service, one must first understand the variety of potential sources of online full-text journals to ensure that the selected comparison service is properly suited to the task. Such sources include for-fee e-journal subscriptions, open access journals, archive services, and full-text databases. The significant shortcomings of most commercially-available and freely-available comparison services must be made transparent in order for the user to have a proper understanding of what the services are able to actually provide in the way of content comparisons. In order to provide librarians with the proper data from which an educated collection development decision can be made, the chosen comparison service must take into account a number of important factors including (but not limited to): the variety of ways in which database providers reflect full-text content information (title name, ISSN, etc.) in their published title lists, loaded vs. licensed (i.e., “coming soon”), the importance of “active” vs. “halted” coverage, and the availability of unique content in each resource under consideration, rather than just overlap.

Keywords

journals, e-journals, comparison services, active, halted, library, collection development, academic, research, full text, databases, EBSCO, ProQuest, Gale, backfiles, archives, content, open access, publishers, subscriptions, Serials Solutions, A-to-Z, TDNet, CUFTS, Goldmine, JISC

Introduction

Comparing online full-text journal access in the effort to make an informed purchasing decision is often a daunting task. Adding to the difficulty of this undertaking is a lack of available guidance on how to properly make such comparisons. This problem is highlighted by Brier and Lebbin when they state that “library literature abounds with articles about full-text databases; however, the evaluation of title coverage has received little attention.”¹

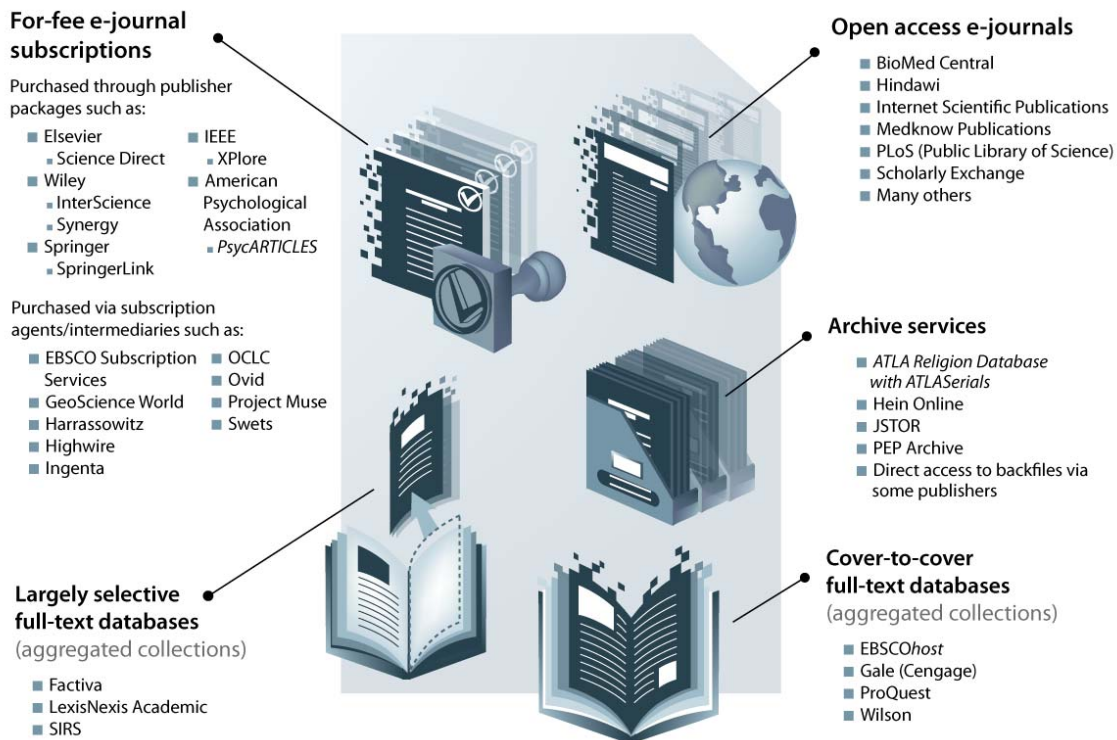
In order to help simplify this process, librarians and other information specialists faced with this challenge often turn to one of a growing number of available comparison services. The theory behind such services is that they will help to shed light on the common vs. unique content of the compared databases, so that the purchaser will better understand the differing values/benefits of each database. However, if they take the time to evaluate the comparison services themselves, they will quickly find that not all comparison services are created equal. This then begs the question that if the different services each produce different results (given the same full-text resources to compare), then how is a librarian to know which service will ultimately provide them with the most accurate comparative content information to make the right purchasing decision for their library? Only by first evaluating the comparison services themselves and gaining a solid understanding of their advantages and disadvantages can librarians know where to turn for an accurate and reliable comparison that will assist them in obtaining the greatest value from their resulting full-text database subscriptions.

Online Journals — Varieties of Access

Before making an in-depth inquiry into the nature of the comparison services themselves, it is first necessary to understand the various models and means by which online access to full-text journals (and other content sources) can be obtained. A solid understanding of the nature of the various full-text content resources themselves provides a fundamental knowledge as to what criteria a comparison service must take into account. By ensuring that journal comparisons take the appropriate criteria into consideration, a librarian can then be certain that the results of the comparison will allow them to make an accurate evaluation of the content under consideration.

Libraries receive online access to journals through many different models. To be clear, e-journals are not the same as journals available via full-text databases. E-journals are the extension of the print journal, available directly through the publisher (or through a subscription agent) at a price somewhat similar to the print. Most e-journals are purchased (rather than leased), so the library actually owns the backfiles (just like the print). Full-text databases are a commonly used method of supplementing e-journal collections. In fact, “much of the value that full text databases bring to a library lies heavily in not only the searching capabilities and deep back files of these collections, but also, importantly, in the many new, high-quality journals that these databases bring into a library that were never before available in that library.”² In contrast to e-journal subscriptions, libraries are only leasing access to the content in most full-text databases. However, the lack of permanent ownership for these databases is a limitation that actually helps to maximize the cost-effectiveness of such resources.

The following diagram illustrates the wide variety of sources for online access to journals:



For-Fee E-Journal Subscriptions

The most current and most stable form of access to online journals is via for-fee e-journal subscriptions. However, this model does have limitations:

1. It is often the most expensive model and price increases of some journals are outpacing increases in library budgets.
2. Many journals do not have an institution e-journal, but are available to institutions via another model such as cover-to-cover full-text databases. For example,

3. Some publishers have an institutional e-journal, but only with incomplete/revolving archival coverage. However, these same journals are often available via cover-to-cover full-text databases with cumulative coverage. For example, *Academy of Management*, one of the world's leading business journal publishers, has a revolving coverage institutional e-journal, but its online backfiles are cumulative via *Business Source* (EBSCOhost).
4. While some publishers are offering extensive backfiles with their e-journals, most are not. Yet, many journals only allow online access to their backfiles via archive services (Hein Online, PEP Archive, etc.) or cover-to-cover full-text databases (e.g., EBSCOhost's *Business Source*, *SocINDEX with Full Text*, etc.).
5. Large publishers frequently buy and sell journals. Therefore, a library can buy access to a journal through a publisher package and then find that ongoing coverage for that journal disappears when the publisher sells it to another publisher from whom the library does not purchase a publisher package.
6. Some publishers put restrictions on their e-journals. While embargoes are now extremely rare on e-journals, simultaneous user access and/or download limitations may affect e-journals, but not other access options.

No library can have a complete collection relying entirely on e-journal subscriptions.

This is why even those universities with the largest e-journal collections in the world are supplementing those collections with online journals from other models.

Open Access Journals

Open access journals have the enormous advantage of being free. However, there is a debate about the quality and/or level of peer-review of many (but certainly not all) of these journals — especially in situations where the author is the one providing the funding. In addition, many of these journals (especially those of the highest-quality) are embargoed. For example, *The New England Journal of Medicine* is available at no charge with a 180-day embargo (via the open access model). However, it is also available via cover-to-cover full-text databases (EBSCOhost via *MEDLINE with Full Text*, and ProQuest) with only a 90-day embargo. Further, it is available as an institutional e-journal with no embargo (the best, but most expensive option). For a journal of this level of importance, any library that is able will obviously purchase the for-fee e-journal. Another disadvantage of open access journals is that they are not always indexed in online research databases; indexes such as *MEDLINE*, *CINAHL*, *PsycINFO*, *Academic Search*, etc. are trailblazing in this area, but many other indexes have not proactively pursued open access journals for indexing coverage. There are also services like DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), Open J-Gate, Szczepanski's List, etc., that are, in effect, very helpful lists of open access journals, but none of which are high-quality research databases with in-depth article indexing.

Archive Services and Full-Text Databases

Archive services are popular institutional supplements to e-journal collections. Librarians value the ownership gained by their institutions through this model. Usage from faculty is often heavy, which is also a real benefit to academic libraries. This model provides the library with full backfiles for hundreds of journals and is clearly superior to microfilm or microfiche (i.e., documents often look better, but the main advantage is the fact that the documents are more widely accessible). However, this model has its drawbacks too. The content is simply not current. In fact, most journals available via archive services contain enormous delays due to publisher-imposed embargoes of what is usually 3–10 years (or longer). In the case of some of the best publishers that participate in some of these services, full-text coverage is permanently stopped.

EBSCO has created PDF archives for hundreds of journals in the disciplines of business and sociology that surpass the leading archive services in these subject areas. The two flagship databases in these areas (*Business Source Complete* and *SocINDEX with Full Text*) are not the only cover-to-cover full-text databases with deep full-text backfiles for journals. EBSCO has also done similar projects for the multi-disciplinary *Academic Search Complete*, and on a smaller scale, for subject-specific databases such as *LGBT Life with Full Text*, *Humanities International Complete*, *Education Research Complete*, *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, *CINAHL Plus with Full Text*, *Dentistry & Oral Sciences Source*, and others. Moreover, the company is in the process of completing a journal backfile digitization project for the forthcoming *Historical Abstracts with Full Text* and *America: History and Life with Full Text* databases. While its competitors have

focused on digitizing backfiles of newspapers, EBSCO has recognized the opening that exists in journal archives and is filling the gap. EBSCO*host* full-text databases are a necessary complement to the leading archive services for any university that is serious about providing archival full-text access to important journals. While the model is not one of ownership for the library, the model is preferable to many publishers, which is why EBSCO can surpass these services in any discipline in which it focuses, guaranteeing that these products will be seen as a necessary complement.

While EBSCO's cover-to-cover full-text journal databases have publisher-imposed embargoes for some included titles, many titles have no embargo whatsoever. In addition, for those titles that do have embargoed coverage, the vast majority of the embargo periods are only 3–12 months as compared to the typical 36–60 month delay of archive services. This further demonstrates how the full-text coverage provided by most EBSCO databases is more comprehensive and current than the coverage provided by archival services.

Importance of Access to Current Journal Content

More important than backfiles is the issue of current, ongoing access to journal literature. There is no library on Earth that can afford to buy access to every e-journal available, and even if they could, there are still many journals for which there is no institutional e-journal. Due to this, libraries cannot gain current access to enough journals simply by relying on e-journal subscriptions, and traditional archive services are not intended to (or able to) help in this area. As a result, cover-to-cover full-text databases are needed to

provide an additional way for end users to access full text from important sources. As mentioned earlier, some cover-to-cover full-text databases, in essence, act as the institutional e-journal for many leading publications. This is one of the reasons that these products are a necessary complement to e-journal subscriptions. Other reasons include the availability of extensive full-text backfiles and the presence of ongoing full text for journals that a library does not subscribe to, yet where an e-journal option does exist.

Emergence of Comparison Services

With the emergence of all of these forms of full-text access to journals, services have emerged that allow librarians to compare the overlap and uniqueness of various access options. These include: *Serials Solutions*, *A-to-Z*, *TDNet*, *CUFTS*, *Goldmine*, *JISC*, and others. All of these services have advantages and disadvantages. These may be powerful resources for their initially intended tasks (i.e., not full-text database evaluations), but in terms of accurate and reliable content comparisons, they typically fall short, often by a significant margin.

While full-text databases should never be used to replace journal subscriptions,³ their main value comes from their ability to bring new, quality, full-text sources into the library. If they can not achieve this goal, then they are no more useful than A&I-only databases and are usually more expensive. As a result, librarians have correctly begun searching for ways to evaluate the overlap between their databases and the rest of their collections. However, the process is greatly flawed, and librarians must look for other ways to measure the overlap and uniqueness of newly proposed resources. The same can

be said for evaluating databases currently under subscription that may actually be pure overlap and therefore unnecessary.

Lack of Standards for Content Title Lists

The fundamental problem with most comparison services is that they simply do not provide results that accurately represent the true journal content of the resources being compared. This is due, in part, to the fact that the full-text journal content of the various online resources is markedly varied in how it is represented via each provider's published journal title lists. In addition:

Because competing vendors don't standardize their database coverage lists, two completely different publications may show the same name and may or may not include an ISSN, making them difficult to distinguish. The opposite might also be true, where the same publication is listed with different names by competing vendors.⁴

For example, most comparison services require an exact match on the journal name and/or ISSN in order to consider a title common to the resources being compared. For example, *Institute of Public Affairs Review*, is listed as such via EBSCO's *Business Source Complete* database, yet it is listed as *Review – Institute of Public Affairs* via ProQuest's *ABI/INFORM Complete*.⁵ If such a discrepancy is not taken into account by a comparison service, then the journal in question may be listed as unique to each of the services being compared, albeit with two slightly different names (or ISSNs). This is a

minor but misleading issue to the user of such a comparison service as it does not provide them with a truly accurate evaluation.

Further, title discrepancies sometimes occur when a journal's name is spelled out in the title list of one provider while only its acronym is used by another. For example, EBSCO's *Academic Search Complete* provides full text for the journal *ATQ* while the same title is offered via ProQuest's *Research Library* (all modules) under the name *American Transcendental Quarterly*.⁶ This particular discrepancy is due in part to the fact that the title in question was formerly called *American Transcendental Quarterly* before the publisher shortened the official name to the acronym *ATQ*. As customers are typically concerned with active, unique content when comparing databases, it is vital that comparisons be based on the currently-published name of journals. If database providers do not offer truly accurate information in their journal title lists (as in the above example), such comparisons of active journal content may be flawed. This can be quite confusing for evaluators who are interested in coverage of particular titles when they are only familiar with the current name of the publication(s). If comparison services continue to base their studies on an exact ISSN and/or publication name match, issues such as those noted above will be extensive. However, these are relatively minor when compared to the more serious flaws in these services.

Four Main Problems with Comparison Services

While the lack of title list standards described above certainly poses a significant hurdle to the comparison process, the comparison services themselves tend to suffer from four main areas of weakness:

1. These services do not differentiate between active full text and unnaturally halted full text
2. These services do not differentiate between severely embargoed journals and journals with no embargo or brief embargoes
3. These services do not allow for the filtering of non-academic (general interest) content, thereby artificially inflating the perceived quantity of unique scholarly content in some products
4. These services only count publications already loaded in each database (newly licensed content is not included)

By not taking these content differences into account, comparison services are failing to provide users with a truly comprehensive picture of the content similarities/differences between relevant databases and actually do them a disservice by providing them with misleading information.

Comparing Apples to Oranges — “Active” vs. “Halted” Coverage

In addition to the problem of varying journal names on published title lists, a much more serious (yet more subtle) problem occurs when two or more resources offer differing coverage of the same journal. As the majority of research conducted via electronic full-

text journals tends to focus primarily on the most recent information (i.e., the last 2-3 years of coverage for any given title), comparison services must take into account whether full-text coverage for each title is “active” or “halted” in nature. A database is said to provide “active” full-text coverage of a particular journal title when such full-text coverage is ongoing and continues to include each new issue as it is made available (taking into account any publisher-imposed embargoes). “Naturally ceased” coverage occurs when a database provides full-text coverage of a particular title up until the date of last publication (i.e., the publication is no longer published, so there is no way for the full-text database to add any new full text for the journal). However, databases often provide “unnaturally halted” full-text coverage of many journals. This occurs when full-text coverage of a particular title ends on a specific date, yet the title remains actively published. The overwhelmingly most common cause for unnaturally halted coverage of a journal is the loss of full-text rights by the full-text database provider. While backfile/archival coverage of full-text journals can play an important role and should be considered in any comparison, active (ongoing) coverage of specific titles is of most importance to today’s online journal researchers. Therefore, comparison services must take this distinction between active and unnaturally halted coverage into consideration in order to paint the most accurate picture of a database’s full-text content.

For example, EBSCO Publishing’s *Business Source Complete* includes full-text coverage of *Harvard Business Review* from 1922 to present, while Gale’s *Business & Company Resource Center* only includes full-text coverage of *Harvard Business Review* from 1997 to 2000. Most librarians would not consider these two resources to be equal in their

coverage of *Harvard Business Review* as one provider offers ongoing (active) full-text coverage of the journal with a deep backfile (more than 80 years), while the other (Gale) only offers unnaturally halted full-text coverage of the same title with an extremely shallow backfile (less than four years). However, virtually all available comparison services do not take such differences of coverage into account[‡]. In the above example, most comparison services would list *Harvard Business Review* as being available in full text via both services. That can hardly be construed as a useful comparison of content. While the potential discrepancy noted above regarding *Harvard Business Review* may be more readily caught due to the high profile of the title, literally hundreds of other such discrepancies are more likely to go unnoticed, thereby providing the library with an inaccurate depiction of the full-text coverage of the databases in question.

Embargoes and Other Full-Text Coverage Differences

Taking into account the aforementioned drawbacks (lack of currency and limited publisher participation) of an archival service, such services clearly should not be included in comparisons against far more current full-text databases due to the vastly different coverage that each resource offers. For example, a title such as *Academy of Management Journal* may be available through a particular database/resource with an embargo of 3-5 years (or even more), yet the same title is available in full text via EBSCO's *Business Source Complete* with no delay (embargo) in coverage.⁷ Even though both services provide coverage of *Academy of Management Journal* back to 1963, there

[‡] It must be noted that *A-to-Z* does allow users the option of comparing full-text coverage from only the most recent two years, which removes most unnaturally halted publications as well as severely embargoed journals.

is clearly an enormous difference in overall coverage of this publication. For a comparison service to simply indicate that both resources feature full-text coverage of this title is misleading at best.

On a related note, when comparing full-text databases, it is also essential to know if the databases in question include cover-to-cover or “selective” full-text content. Selective coverage of full-text content is when a database publisher elects to selectively mine the content of relevant publications for full-text content that is most applicable to the subject(s) covered by the database in question. This can lead to a serious problem when evaluating databases as most comparison services do not properly distinguish between cover-to-cover and selective coverage. For example, two different databases may both provide “full-text” coverage of a general publication such as *Fortune*, but if one database offers cover-to-cover treatment of the title while the other database only offers selective coverage, then a comparison of the two databases is likely to be flawed unless the exact differences in coverage are brought to light as part of the comparison in an obvious way. As most comparison services make no distinction between cover-to-cover and selective journal coverage, librarians need to exercise caution when considering such a comparison. Just because the results of a database comparison indicate that each resource provides full text of “Journal X”, this does not mean that they both offer the same type of coverage (or the same backfiles or the same currency).

Filtering Out Non-Academic Content

Database comparison services also lack the ability to properly distinguish between scholarly (i.e., peer-reviewed) journals and more general publications. Many users of comparison services would find it quite valuable to know the difference in coverage of scholarly content between two or more databases. However, as most comparison services do not provide this information in one form or another, they are unable to supply a valuable piece of information to their users.

In general, librarians need to fully-educate themselves regarding the potential differences in how databases provide full-text coverage of specific journal titles (active vs. halted, current vs. embargoed, academic vs. non-academic, etc.). With a thorough understanding of such differences in coverage, librarians may begin to accurately interpret the results of most database comparisons.

Comparing Licensed (Intended) vs. Loaded (Actual) Content

Typically, newly-licensed content found in full-text databases can take some time to be fully incorporated into the product. Therefore, it is beneficial for such information (“Intended” content) to be accurately reflected on the database provider’s published title list. EBSCO and Gale list these titles as “Coming Soon”. If details regarding newly-licensed content are made readily available in this manner, potential customers can more easily take this information into account when evaluating the database for possible future purchase.

Many services, especially e-journal portals (e.g., *Serials Solutions*, *A-to-Z*, and *TDNet*) base their comparisons on journal titles that are already available on the product at the time of the comparison (“Actual” content). As most full-text databases experience an ongoing stream of content changes (due to a variety of reasons), such a fundamental basis for comparisons is faulty. For example, if an academic library is considering the addition of *Database A* to their collection for the start of their next semester, they will likely request some sort of title comparison anywhere from 6–12 months earlier, so that they have ample time to complete their evaluation. If the comparison they utilize does not take into account intended content changes for *Database A* that will take place between the time of the comparison and the beginning of the next semester when they begin using the product, then they will not be able to make a proper evaluation of the content that will be available to them during their subscription period. The information provided by only comparing “Actual” content will likely prove to be quite outdated (and therefore unreliable) by the time they actually begin to use the product. Content that will be inevitably included in the database will not be made known to the library, nor will the reviewer be made aware of any important titles currently available in the database that will be removed or halted in coverage over the next few months. By not providing such highly-pertinent information during the evaluation process, comparison services fall far short of meeting the needs of their clients.

Comparisons Done by the Full-Text Database Vendor for its Customers

As libraries are looking to maximize the value of their full-text collections by reducing overlap between electronic resources, while simultaneously expanding access to new

content, EBSCO Publishing (provider of *EBSCOhost*) has made a commitment to helping their customers achieve this goal. Some of the ways in which the organization has been able to assist customers in this manner include evaluating potential cost savings of replacing existing full-text databases with newer/larger ones via *EBSCOhost*, while maintaining access to existing content and introducing valuable new content at the same time.

It is the policy of EBSCO Publishing to provide customers and prospects with the cleanest, most accurate full-text journal title comparisons possible. To this end, the company strives to avoid all of the potential shortcomings of other comparison services mentioned above. This has been achieved, in part, through EBSCO Publishing's development of its own sophisticated content comparison system and by employing a team of dedicated staff that focus all of their efforts on the creation of customized comparisons for customers.

Despite the fact that *A-to-Z* is an EBSCO product, it does not yet offer the same sophistication as outlined here, although recent improvements have eliminated some of its shortcomings, and as a result, it is superior to equivalent products from other vendors. The "EBSCO" comparisons mentioned here are those requested through EBSCO Publishing, involving *EBSCOhost* databases.

These EBSCO-generated title comparisons focus on "active" full-text content, so that the requestor receives a true representation of how the ongoing, active content of each

resource compares. If one full-text database has “unnaturally halted” full-text coverage for a journal, while another has “active” full-text coverage, the comparison counts the file with active full text as having unique full text and disregards the unnaturally halted coverage. These comparisons can also limit to peer-reviewed journals and/or journals indexed in Web of Science.

Conclusion

The importance of making a careful evaluation of available full-text resources is stressed once again by Brier and Lebbin: “In many cases, librarians no longer have a dialogue with patrons or the opportunity to guide them to high-quality sources. The convenience of remote access, coupled with the tendency to select the first full-text article available, regardless of quality, are compelling reasons why careful examination of the quality of each title in a full-text database is necessary.”⁸ Only through a comprehensive evaluation of selected resources can libraries ensure that their patrons are relying on quality full-text resources for their research.

Electing to compare information resources in order to make educated purchasing decisions that will make the best use of a library’s collection budget and maximize the value of the library’s collection of full-text resources is the first step towards choosing the proper comparison service. A service must then be selected that will ultimately provide a clear picture of the value provided by each of the compared databases. Such a service must first be able to take into account the differing ways in which database providers reflect full-text content information in their published title lists. Intended content and not

just actual content should be considered by comparison services in order to give a true representation of the ongoing value of the databases under consideration. While all content arguably provides some measure of value, unnaturally halted full text is clearly of less value than ongoing active full-text coverage, and comparison services should weigh their results accordingly. Knowing the overlap between two or more full-text databases can be useful information, especially if the intent is to replace one database with another. However, to truly provide a comprehensive comparison, the content that is unique to each database must be clearly shown in addition to that which is common (overlapping content). All of these points must be taken into consideration when selecting a content comparison service in order to maximize the value of the resulting database purchasing decision(s). Librarians should pressure comparison services to amend their products to address the limitations outlined here. Until then, EBSCO Publishing is producing comparisons on a case-by-case basis for its customers. By spending a small amount of additional time in choosing an appropriate comparison service, librarians will be better able to ensure that they are spending their budget in the most efficient manner by eliminating as much duplicate content as possible while maximizing their collection of unique content.

Notes

¹ David J. Brier, and Vickery Kaye Lebbin, "Evaluating Title Coverage of Full-text Periodical Databases," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 25, no. 6 (November 1999): 473.

² Sam Brooks, "Academic Journal Embargoes and Full Text Databases," *The Library Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (July 2003): 258.

³ Sam Brooks, "Integration of Information Resources and Collection Development Strategy," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 27, no. 4 (July 2001): 317.

⁴ Sam Brooks, "Evaluating Evaluations," *Library Journal: Net Connect* 131 (January 2006): 28.

⁵ Title Discrepancy last verified on December 4, 2009 via applicable company websites (www.ebscohost.com and www.proquest.com).

⁶ Title Discrepancy last verified on December 4, 2009 via applicable company websites (www.ebscohost.com and www.proquest.com).

⁷ Confirmed via EBSCO Publishing's website (<http://www.ebscohost.com/titleLists.php?topicID=380&tabForward=titleLists&marketID=>) on December 4, 2009.

⁸ Brier and Lebbin, "Evaluating Title Coverage of Full-text Periodical Databases," 476.